

Theresa May and Boris Johnson: Secrecy as Statecraft?

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*During UK-EU Brexit negotiations, Theresa May pursued a determined path of concealment and non-disclosure. Envisaged as a way to protect herself against political opposition, enhancing her bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU and deliver policy promises, the strategy failed and contributed to the end of her premiership. **Ben Worthy and Marlen Heide** detail how her case illustrates the powers of increasing transparency expectations and the risks of concealment over longer times or around contentious issues. It provides a useful lesson for her successor.*



Contemporary leaders are caught between expectations and obligations of transparency and the pressure to achieve tangible outcomes in complex and hostile political environments. Being open is a moral commitment and a way of building trust and legitimacy. Yet leaders still have powerful incentives and temptations to choose a strategy of concealment to protect their power, policy plans or reputation. As such, secrecy still features as part of leaders' strategic repertoire. How does such an approach play out in an age of transparency?

Pursuing a strategy of secrecy can be a powerful instrument protecting leaders' room for manoeuvre or power. It can be vital for protecting early or delicate discussions, especially around contentious policy issues. Frequently, secrecy also serves to minimise blame or conceal personal or political mistakes.

Secrecy can, in certain contexts, be a necessary, if not fruitful, way of leading. Concealment, however, comes with risks and downsides, undermining the benefits it is supposed to bring. Secrecy provokes suspicion and speculation, and can raise demands for transparency or provoke leaks. Cover-ups of political mistakes can cause greater damage on a leader's reputation in the long-term, creating stronger opposition and undermining trust. The can even prove terminal to a career, as the resignations of Eden and Nixon show. Finally,

secrecy needs constant maintenance and can consume valuable time and political energy.

Table 1: Incentives for secrecy and related risks

	Strengths	Risks
Power (ability to get things done)	Enhances a leader's control	Can lead to leaks or counter-availing power
Policy (particular issue or process)	Guards a process or decision	Can attract pressure for openness and institutional attention
Reputation (image and opinion)	Protects image and reputation	If exposed can damage leadership and public support

The case of Theresa May's premiership shows what happens when a leader chooses a strategy of concealment in an age of transparency. It illustrates that context is key, and secrecy is more difficult for high-profile controversial issues, such as Brexit, and particularly damaging if exposed when it is tied to the reputation of the leader themselves, as was the case for May.

Theresa May: Prime Minister of secrets

Theresa May had a long-standing reputation for strict information control and a secretive working style. As Home Secretary between 2010 and 2016, she had a ['preference for working with a close team of advisers \[nicknamed the Chiefs\], often not bothering to share information with Number 10 or other ministers'](#). She avoided publicity and scrutiny when problems threatened, causing David Cameron to call her ['the submarine'](#). May ['survived as home secretary for six years partly because she held a tight grip over information flows'](#) and twice (in 2011 and 2016), blame avoidance and information control saved her career.

As a Prime Minister, May tied her reputation to her ability to successfully negotiate Brexit and, in turn, Brexit to secrecy. She made it clear that her approach was based on strict confidentiality by saying [there will be no 'running commentary' on the negotiations](#). May was warned in late 2016 that ['silence is not a strategy'](#). In her case, concealment was doubly risky, since there was no substantive policy to protect.

In the short-term, May's approach temporarily preserved her room for manoeuvre, and her power over a divided party. Many of her big decisions – triggering article 50 or calling a snap election – were taken in small, secret groups. Her avoidance of the press for anything other than set-piece interviews or speeches helped protected her reputation for competence for some time, at least until the election campaign of 2017 shined a dazzling, brutal, light on her abilities.

May's secretive approach came under pressure domestically. For over two years, Parliament used all the tools at its disposal to force greater openness around Brexit. MPs and committees sought to open up Brexit. Between 2016 and 2018 select committees launched more than 108 inquiries into various aspects of Brexit, as well as creating a new, unusually large, DEXEU committee to scrutinise the negotiations. The 'publicity spotlight' at committee hearings revealed ministerial contradictions or confusion. In one day in November 2017, for example, six committees simultaneously questioned six different officials and ministers about Brexit.

One key symbolic battle concerned several government-produced studies on the impact of Brexit. Their existence first became known in the summer of 2017, triggering several requests for documentary access. After FOIs were refused, in November 2017 Labour used an obscure piece of parliamentary procedure, [a Humble Address to Her Majesty](#), to [force the government to release them](#). Other key pieces of information that the government clearly wished to keep secret, from other assessments to legal advice, were forced out of them or informally disclosed. Alongside the more spectacular battles was a daily drip of disclosure. Parliamentary pressure through questions, statements and government scrutiny meant, as the Chair of the Exiting the EU committee put it, 'we learn something new about the potential impact of Brexit every day'.

At the same time, May's divided government leaked continually. The leaks began straight away, and this BBC headline sums it up quite how bad things became: '[Leak inquiry into leaking of letter warning about leaks](#)'. This got worse after 2017 as May's authority waned and Cabinet ministers openly undermined and contradicted policy. Behind the scenes, pressure from Conservative backbench MPs forced May to be more open and publish the first Brexit White paper in 2017 and another in 2018. By 2019 May appeared to have lost control of the policy, the narrative and with it her own reputation.

Boris Johnson: hiding in plain sight?

Interestingly, May's successor, Boris Johnson, has followed the same path, with hidden plans for Brexit, made with a closed networks of advisers. He too has said he will deliver Brexit, but what the real plans are - or if there is plan - remains a mystery, with bluff, secrecy and lies swirling like a smokescreen.

In his leadership bid there were limited chances for questions from the press and few interviews. Once in power, Johnson appointed Dominic Cummings, who had [been held in contempt of Parliament over his refusal to give evidence](#). There were early warnings that leaking would mean instant dismissal (though that was, of course, leaked). Most controversially there has been the lengthy prorogation of parliament, which means that Johnson has had a mere five days of scrutiny and avoided the now regular liaison committee appearance, which was scheduled for today, [11 September](#). Rumours abound of Johnson's government not only avoiding scrutiny itself, but seeking to [scrutinise and gather data on us](#).

The counter-pressure for forced openness has been even swifter for Johnson than May. Again, like May, Johnson now faces pressure to publish government assessments, this time around 'Operation Yellowhammer', its analysis of the impact of a no-deal Brexit (already leaks have [undermined Johnson's own claims](#)). In the final moments before Parliament was prorogued, a humble address again struck, [seeking messages, including texts as WhatsApp messages](#), around prorogation, sending a signal of the determination of opponents to break open the government's plans. The [motion covered](#):

All correspondence and other communications (whether formal or informal, in both written and electronic form, including but not limited to messaging services including WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, Facebook messenger, private email accounts both encrypted and unencrypted, text messaging and iMessage and the use of both official and personal mobile phones.

ACTION
ENDING THE SESSION

Deadline: 16 August 2019

Date: 16 August 2019

PRIME MINISTER'S COMMENTS:

- ① The date September session is a nightmare introduced [redacted] to show the public that MPs were earning their cash
- ② So I don't see anything specially shocking about this proposition
- ③ As Nikki notes, it is OVER THE CONFERENCE SEASON so that the sitting days that are actually very few

The all-embracing nature was due to fears – based on [leaks from anonymous public officials](#) to Dominic Grieve MP – that decisions were being made outside of formal records and decision-making process ([something Michael Gove has previous for](#)). Even if the motion fails to turn up much information – and the government seems unwilling to provide any – it will create pressure for leaks and scrutiny from elsewhere. At the same time, the case in the Scottish courts may prove a crucial first step in undermining his power. It first revealed Downing Street documents showing [Johnson's planning back in August](#), including his insult that Cameron was a 'girly swot' (initially redacted, see image), and today the Court of Session has concluded the main purpose of prorogation was to hinder scrutiny, and so unlawful.

We'll see when the UK Supreme Court considers the matter next week the full extent of the damage to Johnson's reputation, and the extent to which such secrecy helps or hinders his power, his policy and his reputation. Hiding anything over a long period of time in a high polarised and partisan environment is almost impossible. May's attempts to keep the Brexit negotiations secret amid such strong transparency pressure, and with a divided, leak-prone government, always appeared highly unlikely, if not futile. Secrecy triggered a negative spiral against a greater counter-pressure for transparency, exposing May's policy. Using secrecy to protect a reputation means that any exposure has consequences for a leader's credibility: May's premiership came under even greater scrutiny, eventually crashing her reputation. For May, in the end, secrecy failed to deliver power, protection or tangible results. Will it for Boris Johnson?

This post has been updated to include a reference to the [ruling of the Scottish Court of](#)

[Session on prorogation](#) on 11 September.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on their article, '[Secrecy and Leadership: The Case of Theresa May's Brexit Negotiations](#)', recently published in *Public Integrity*, 1-13.

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